Arts-based Learning: An interview with Ted Buswick
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Ted Buswick heads the BCG History program at The Boston Consulting Group and was formerly Director of Publications for BCG’s Strategy Institute. He is also Executive-in-Residence for Leadership and the Arts in the Graduate School of Management at Clark University. He is co-author of What Poetry Brings to Business (University of Michigan Press, 2010) and Slate of Hand: Stone for Fine Arts and Folk Art (Trafford, 2007); and co-editor with Harvey Seifter of two special issues of the Journal of Business Strategy about arts-based learning for business (2005 and 2010).

Businesses are focusing more attention on increasing creativity and innovation in their organizations in order to stay competitive in the global economy.

1. **As one of the pioneers in the field of arts-based learning, could you give a brief definition of arts-based learning for those who are unfamiliar with the term, including what business can learn from the arts?**

There is no accepted definition yet. Among those put forward, two of the best and most cited are by Lotte Darsø¹ and by Steve Taylor and Donna Ladkin.² I like to use a definition that explains arts-based learning more by what it does than by what it is.

Arts-based learning—applying processes and results of the arts to improve performance and productivity in other fields—can best be understood through the effect it can have on business, government, and civic leaders. Until recently, the arts and business relationship has been dominated by business sponsorship of the arts, but it is now recognized that the arts can contribute to business, too, most notably by countering our society’s inclination toward quantitative, linear, rational thinking that seeks quick answers and is averse to ambiguity and risk. There are (at least) four ways in which arts-based learning can open people’s minds to new thinking and sensing options.

Arts-based learning can:

**Change behavior**

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Examples: Unconsciously and regularly applying associative thinking; increasing openness to ambiguity; improving ability to recognize layered perception, to defer judgment, to detect weak signals; increasing openness to risk; improving wholeness of response by blending emotional and logical faculties; improving interpersonal understanding and relationships; improving intercultural understanding

**Teach a definable skill or set of skills**
Examples: Improving presentations; analyzing a specific problem; increasing effectiveness of using art or music in marketing; increasing ability to brainstorm in business meetings

**Introduce a difficult topic**
Examples: Theatrical performance to show problems in the organization; poetic or literary example to introduce subject by analogy; any art to express new ideas that don’t have an accepted language

**Inspire**
Example: Unguided, open-ended positive feelings that come from viewing a presentation, performance, or exhibition, possibly followed by informal discussion

I’m most interested in the first three ways because they are the newer, emerging forms of arts-based learning and can have the greatest long-term effect on business, nonprofits, and government.

All of the arts have been held up as being useful tools to expand the way people think, but each has its own most effective applications. Our team dealing with poetry and business in The Strategy Institute of The Boston Consulting Group believes that poetry, because of its base in language, and language supplemented by unusual associations, rhythms, sounds, and nuances well beyond daily discourse, is a superb choice for training in dealing with ambiguity and in awareness of the many meanings buried in all discourse.  

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2. **Can creativity be taught, or is it something inherent in an individual?**

It can be taught, although some people have advantages if creativity was encouraged in their upbringing and education. There are many people who effectively teach creativity—carefully distinguishing it from the innovation process—and all have their favorite exercises. A great many of the exercises are based in the arts, but the arts are certainly not the only approach. Often creativity is approached by teaching interdisciplinary thinking, or, as Franz Johansson puts it, working with intersectional ideas. The blend of arts and business is a primary intersectional area, but so, too, is history or biology, for example.

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As Liz Lerman pointed out at the recent Americans for the Arts 50th Anniversary Conference, a discussion of the distinction between originality and creativity is also worthwhile to help people understand what is creative.

3. How do you make creativity tangible and actionable? Can you give an example of a successful project? Is the impact measurable?

I believe the best way to make it tangible is to tie the training to an actual problem. When creativity is being taught in a company or organization, a problem can be selected beforehand and then the training can either be connected with an analysis of the problem, or more often creative techniques can be taught and then students can collectively apply the techniques to the real problem. In such a situation, the goal should be to immediately apply what you’ve learned when you return to work.

Perhaps the most cited example of a successful project is Catalyst, from Unilever in the UK. It has been documented in a number of places, including an interview with the CEO of one of the divisions. By offering a wide range of after-work programs and volunteer opportunities, they involved an impressively high percentage of their employees, and strong support began at the top.

There is as yet no repetitive quantitative way to measure the success of arts-based learning, which often is a roadblock for working with business executives. I would think that an abundance of anecdotal success stories would be convincing. Just as consulting firms effectively use references to secure new business, I think arts-based learning practitioners need to more effectively use their references, especially when those references are peers to the prospective clients.

4. Have you witnessed an increased understanding and acceptance of arts-based learning in the business world, or is it still a tough sell?

Rather than being a practitioner, I’m a writer, editor, and educator who stays informed by talking with many practitioners around the world. Arts-based learning is a tough sell, especially when we still have a difficult economy. In our Editors’ Introduction to the new special issue of the *Journal of Business Strategy*, Harvey Seifter and I note how even champions of arts-based learning for business, such as Americans for the Arts in the U.S. and Arts & Business in the UK have pulled back from their previous levels of support.

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because they could not generate the short-term ROI that was desired. “Selling cycles proved to be too long and complex, delivery was too customized and labor intensive, and the financial pressures motivating both the service organizations and artist practitioners led to unrealistic pricing strategies.”

But if we believe in the results of the recent IBM survey of over 1,500 CEOs, effectively summarized in *Fast Company* (May 18, 2010), which indicates that creativity is the #1 leadership competency of the future, then we need to persevere through the tough selling cycle, push for extended programs for artists in corporations and organizations (trying to minimize one-off engagements), and assure that successes are well publicized.

5. **Do you have any thoughts on what makes an artist or arts organization an effective practitioner of arts-based learning?**

The world of business must be understood and the artist or arts organization should see itself as providing a service that complements the business. They must not anticipate that businesspeople will understand the art or its terminology and must be willing to go more than half-way in the business-arts relationship. Terminology and understanding of the specific organization you’re hoping to work in will build credibility.

The emphasis in training should be on business problems being solved, not on arts techniques being used. Some practitioners make sure that each arts intervention has a real business problem from the organization to address, so there will always be immediate implementation of ideas; I think this kind of relevance should be discussed prior to every engagement. Some organizations avoid references to arts techniques and simply apply them to business solutions with minimal mention of the origins. Yet some arts applications must be done with obvious use of the art, for example using jazz to teach improvisation. So there’s no one solution.

Here’s a sampling of different approaches. Michael Spencer of Sound Strategies emphasizes sound and music in his training; Tim Stockil of Ci: Creative Intelligence has expertise in Forum Theatre and has won two national training awards in the UK; Michael Gold of Jazz Impact features how jazz can improve skills for improvisation, risk-taking, and renewal. On a broader level, Suzanne Merritt of Ideas with Merritt (and founder of the former Polaroid Creativity Lab) uses a wide range of arts techniques to match customer needs, although she’d like to be teaching an understanding of beauty and its applications; Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaeufer of the Presencing Institute focus on the concept of Presencing and use many different arts to achieve their results. On the integrative side, Harvey Seifter of Seifter Associates and Nick Nissley of the Banff Centre both are practitioners and leading experts on arts-based learning, but these days often act as matchmakers, determining when arts-based learning is appropriate, then working with the artist(s) to develop the writing, training, or teaching skills to convey what’s needed.
In an effort to increase business, practitioners who specialize in one art must be alert to not force-fit it their “product” into every problem. They must heed the warning in the old cliché, if your only tool is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail.

When many businesses try arts-based learning for the first time, it’s a test case. The results will determine whether they try it again. This is why anyone hiring an arts-based practitioner should be very careful. Check references. If possible, see an example of the person’s or group’s training. This, though, all adds to the slow selling process mentioned above. It’s both a handicap to practitioners and protection against having mediocre training sessions hurt the playing field for everyone else.

This is a young and growing field. The more we can publish in mainstream business publications, present before business audiences, and have direct conversations with leaders, the more quickly arts-based learning will grow as it should.

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